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NEWS

More than half of young autistic children have language delays

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Most 4-year-old autistic children cannot string more than two words together. And about 40 percent of all children referred to an autism clinic have significant language delay, regardless of their autism diagnosis.

The findings are based on more than 500 children who visited an autism clinic in Baltimore between 2012 and 2019.

Researchers presented the unpublished results today at the **2019 International Society for Autism Research** annual meeting in Montreal.

Although **speech delay** is known to accompany autism, researchers know little about the demographics of autistic children who lack verbal skills.

Children who are non-white or are enrolled in public health insurance programs are more likely to have delayed speech, the study suggests.

"[These children] are not making it into the system by 3 years of age, and they've missed a period of time where they could be receiving early intervention services," says Julie Feuerstein, a postdoctoral researcher in **Rebecca Landa**'s lab at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore.

Treatment gap:

Feuerstein and her colleagues combed medical records for 573 children aged 3 to 4 who visited the institute's Center for Autism and Related Disorders; about 380 of the children had been assessed for autism, and 277 were diagnosed with it. Of the diagnosed children, 133 could speak at a level typical for their age and 144 could not.

In the entire sample, children with speech delay were more likely than those without to have parents lacking a college education.

About 20 percent of children with delayed speech are not getting any form of speech or language therapy, the researchers report.

"That's a problem," Feuerstein says. "Some of these kids are getting ready to head into kindergarten; they don't have functional speech and they are not getting intervention."

For more reports from the 2019 International Society for Autism Research annual meeting, please click here.